

# Houses must be safe homes



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**I**T'S groundhog day in the remote Aboriginal communities of the Northern Territory as another housing crisis drags on. Desperate shortages of basic accommodation, program delays, cost overruns, buck-passing, ministerial obfuscations: we have been here before.

The eventual resolution that will be found for the mess that federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin and her NT counterparts have dug for themselves is already clear. The troubled Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program's initial pledge of 750 new community houses will be carried through to fulfilment, at enormous additional expense; the NT's \$1.7 billion share of the grandiosely named National Partnership on Remote Indigenous Housing will be largely used up in the process; the houses built under SIHIP will be smaller and less robust than first planned. The population explosion in the north will continue and shortages will loom once more.

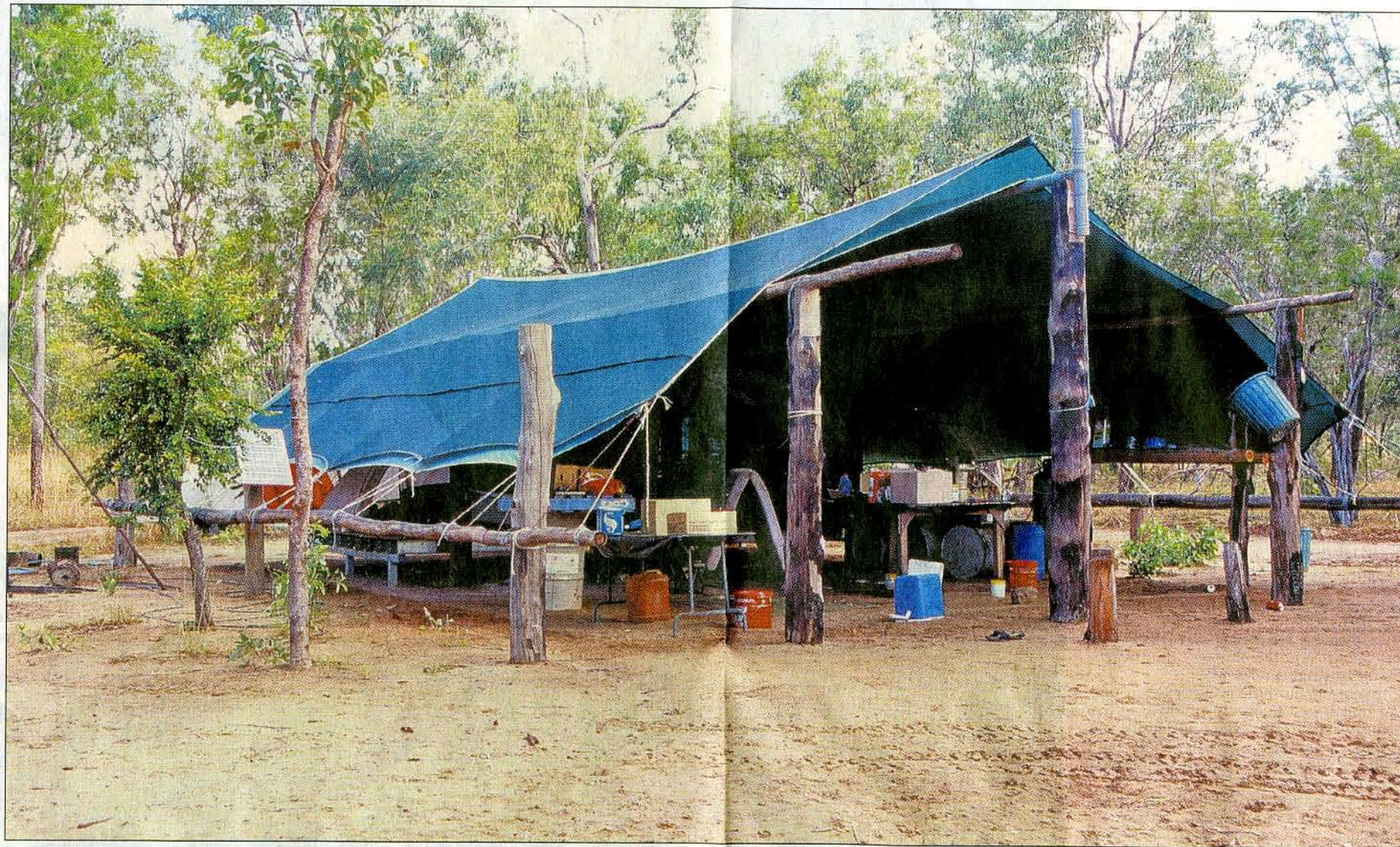
This cycle of high-cost programs and sharp controversy has marked out the Aboriginal housing scene in the NT for a generation, and the quick fixes now being snatched at by governments will do much to entrench them for a generation to come.

Worse still, the grave social questions confronting remote indigenous Australia are being conveniently pushed towards the sidelines as new housing becomes the great panacea, the magic bullet that will restore harmony to a tormented realm. Good housing would be a great step forward, if there could be simple agreement on what it was and where and how to build it. But housing is also, in riddling ways, not just a problem in its own right but a symptom of other problems, and an emblem, too, of the remote world's failure to live the mainstream's dream of integration.

There is a dreadful, tragic aspect to this tale. Architecture is the most idealistic of professions and in Australia the drive to house indigenous community dwellers well has been unceasing. A virtual sub-discipline, Aboriginal community architecture, has developed, its practitioners engaged and committed.

Indeed, some of their number were consulted on the SIHIP program, had high hopes for its alliance model and know just how it has been mismanaged. But their lips are neatly sealed by confidentiality agreements, the means by which modern governments evade public scrutiny. In fact, a large body of architectural knowledge has been compiled on how Aboriginal people once lived and how their social habits persist and shape the ways in which they use housing, and use it for their ends, not those of policy designers. As a result, we have strong clues as to what should work in remote-area housing.

We also know the political cycle that rules the debates on, and funding of, indigenous housing. The doyen of the field, Paul Memmott, director of the Aboriginal Environments Research Centre at the University of Queensland, surveying the landscape just a year ago,



**Low-cost alternative:** A permanent, steel-poled, wooden-floored structure that costs \$13,000 in the Arnhem Land plateau outstation of Kabulwarnamyo

Picture: Paul Benjafield

described the swings of the pendulum. In 2007 he had feared the Coalition federal government would tilt remote community housing policy towards the goals of assimilation. But in 2008 he worried, presciently, that the Rudd government would try to solve the problem by throwing money at it fast, an approach that would also fail, he felt.

The cycle seems implacable. New ideas for design and construction come in, intended to reduce capital costs and delivery schedules, but these shifts always cut standards, raise maintenance expenses and reduce the durability of buildings.

Much effort has been expended in thinking through new ways of housing Aboriginal people on communities. Three broad paradigms have been developed: the cultural design approach, which starts from the premise that traditionally oriented indigenous groups must be given houses made to fit their social patterns; the environmental health design approach, aimed at eradicating preventable illnesses caused by bad housing; and housing as process, which sees housing as one element in a community's social planning and aims at maximum local involvement in building and maintenance.

Houses, and even neighbourhoods, have been constructed according to these precepts

and lived in with mixed outcomes, which have been painstakingly assessed. But much indigenous housing of a less evolved kind has also been built. The standard community home across large parts of the NT is brick, with a rooftop air-conditioner and twin concrete veranda pads: solid, charmless, unloved.

The way things go in such housing follows a simple pattern. The inside will be largely bare of furniture but filled up by five or 10 mattresses or swags. There will usually be dust, camp dogs and dirt stains. The kitchen will be home to piled-up plates and debris, and cockroaches in large supply. From behind closed bedroom doors will come the muffled sounds of loud music.

The verandas are the key living and mealtime space. The periphery, where cars and wreckage rest, provide a buffer for social interactions. And all these arrangements oddly echo what would once have been in a traditional encampment.

Much about this lifestyle makes sense if the extended family is the basic unit and the home is shared in common, if work is in short supply, if poverty is a universal condition and young children are numerically dominant.

Not only does the housing stock shape Aboriginal community life, the social and economic realities shape the way housing

functions. And houses play a strong symbolic role as well, on both sides of the administrative divide.

Many Aboriginal families insist they want houses that look like mainstream accommodation, even though such boxy buildings hardly suit their needs in deserts or tropics.

Many Western incomers, contracting and advising, like to design neat, suburban dwellings in the vague hope they will encourage patterns of order and regularity in social life. No one size fits all. Housing needs for outstations differ vastly from the requirements in cramped, huddled large communities where the SIHIP funds are being spent today.

Architects and planners, viewing this field, see its complexity and strive for ideal solutions, regional-level planning and improved procurement, while community leaders simply plead for more dwellings, fast.

The deeper context — political, and psychological — often goes unseen. Housing provided by the state is both salvation and trap. It is desperately needed, it is seen by many of those seeking it and providing it as a right, but it also gives officials control over their subjects.

Thus, new housing being built under SIHIP is only being provided in return for leases given by Aboriginal traditional owners to Canberra, and the location of new housing is

being decided by governments: housing helps enforce the hub-and-spoke model that fosters a concentration of indigenous people into a small set of favoured towns.

Equally, state housing — especially expensive housing — constitutes a veiled form of passive welfare. The expectation that one should receive a house is widely held in Aboriginal communities, and it is also widely assumed that everyone in wider Australian society gets one from the state as well.

The impetus to work and save and build one's own home is absent. There is simply no pathway for such a dream to take hold in remote communities today. Low-cost housing options are crowded out by the promise of a new government-funded home. Yet many low-cost housing options exist and they are often preferable.

Who is to say that an inexpensive outstation dwelling, with advanced communications laid on for schooling, and with top-grade solar power, would not give a good life-platform?

Environment Minister Peter Garrett paid a visit this month to the celebrated Arnhem Land plateau outstation of Kabulwarnamyo, where the permanent tent-home structures — raised, steel-poled, wooden-floored — were bought for \$13,000 each. If eco-ranger jobs are the wave of the future in the north and centre,

such dispersed settlement patterns and low-cost housing options seem attractive, especially when compared with tight-packed, highly policed dormitory communities.

Why do housing programs in the north fail so spectacularly, and also fail to yield rising social outcomes? Inefficiencies, the backlog in unbuilt homes and the poor surrounding infrastructure explain much, but not all.

Anthropologist Peter Sutton in recent years has explored the disquieting point that traditional Aboriginal social norms are ill-adapted to housed, settled life, and that a complex of causes limits change in disadvantaged indigenous societies.

One striking feature could be quickly changed. Sutton claims some medical practitioners in the bush simply do not act strongly to urge behavioural modifications on their patients, while Aboriginal patients widely fail to comply with basic health advice.

This pattern extends across much of the remote community life system and explains to a considerable extent the high mortality rates seen across the NT.

Sutton's bleak argument here goes to the heart of the tangled issues that lurk behind the facade of housing and its present discontents. To build a successful new society in the bush, several things are necessary.

First, that society must want to live, thrive and move ahead, and it must believe it can. It must dream of retaining tradition and attaining modernity. It is the prescription that has been emerging from a new group of remote community leaders.

One core theme in this complex of ideas was eloquently expressed in August by Kimberley woman Mary Victor O'Reeri, famous for her work as an anti-suicide campaigner, at a meeting in Canberra's National Museum in the presence of Macklin. O'Reeri spoke of housing in her region and the aspect of housing that's not talked about: "How it's been an excuse in many indigenous communities that overcrowding is acceptable, normal, and part of our culture. We let everybody and anybody into our homes. It may sound harsh but we contribute to the housing problem."

Her point, bluntly, was that if Aboriginal communities are to be founded on family life, then those families must be functional, their houses must be homes and defended against the influences of alcohol, violence and drugs. This is the hard line she reaches: "We've got to stop talking about houses and start talking about homes. If all that's on offer is a house without the means to create a home and a safe family, then is it any wonder the whole program is stuck and unnecessarily wasteful?"

So a lone woman from the Dampier Peninsula lays bare the truth. No architect and no multi-year construction program can fix problems that are internal to minds and hearts. Nor can the words of bureaucracy show the way. Good, well-thought housing is a precondition for progress, not progress itself.

Yet it is the lever preferred today by governments, for houses can be quantified, photographed and adduced as proof of official concern.

Here is last month's NT and federal government announcement about SIHIP progress: "The program will help to reduce overcrowding and is critical for protecting children, improving health, education and employment and rebuilding positive community norms."

One can almost hear the compassion fatigue in the press release.